



Kahini (Fiction)

India 1996

Dir: Malay Bhattacharya



105 min., 35mm, 1:1.85, Color, EP

Produktion: Movie Mill. Buch: Malay Bhattacharya. Script Consultant: Shyamal Sengupta. Kamera: Sunny Joseph. Ton: Chinmoy Nath. Musik: Debajyoti Mishra. Schnitt: Arghya Kamal Mitra. Produzenten: Malay Bhattacharya, Chandramala Bhattacharya.

Darsteller: Dhritiman Chatterjee (Rajat), Debesh Roy Chowdhury (Taxifahrer), Debashish Goswami (Schildermaler), Rabi Gosh, Neelkantha Sengupta, Suranjana Dasgupta, Anuradha Ghatak.

Uraufführung: 13.8.1996, Neu Delhi.

Weltvertrieb: Movie Mill, 6/1 Lindsay Street, 1st Floor, Calcutta 700087, Indien. Tel.: (91-33) 249 7081 od. (91-33) 249 0650, Fax: (91-33) 228 58 55.

Sun 16.02. 12:00 Akademie der Künste

Tue 18.02. 16:00 Kino 7 im Zoo Palast

Tue 18.02. 19:00 Delphi

Wed 19.02. 10:00 Arsenal

One day, while rummaging through a heap of old, personal belongings Rajat decides to kidnap a child. But before he can come up with a proper plan of action, a mysterious stranger drops in to leave with Rajat a few old documents, court papers and a half-burnt picture of his childhood. The puzzling photograph inspires Rajat to carry on with his secret mission. In this he is joined by a taxi driver and a sign painter. They get into a strange car. Their mysterious journey gradually leads them into a whirlpool of astonishing events with harrowing characters. Unexpectedly, the kidnappers encounter an amazing killer, a loquacious petrol pump boy who had a difficult childhood and a desperately lonely woman who runs a roadside tea-shop.

Their journey continues through a strange forest. Ultimately it ends at a dilapidated house. Here the trio meets Tarak Das - the stubborn caretaker of the house who strongly believes in a cure for the hopeless condition of his spastic child. Meanwhile, the distressing condition of the kidnapped child worsens. With apprehension and anxiety, confusion mounts. Leaving the group, Rajat goes to visit a nearby market. There the continuous cycle of varied human activities moves him. He decides to return. Sadly, on their way back the child dies. Rajat contemplates suicide.

At this juncture, the sequence of events takes a different turn. Neela - a close acquaintance of Rajat - is interrogated. It is revealed that the burnt photograph of Rajat's childhood presented to him by the stranger earlier is similar to that of the kidnapped child. Slowly, we realise - the kidnapped child is Rajat himself. With this crucial revelation, the story eschews its apparent

motive. Rajat's companions, too, no longer remain real. But Rajat's own journey through the everyday maze of appearance and reality carries on. As if mesmerised by himself, he sees no escape from this adventure.

Viewer-friendly

The problem with many great filmmakers is that they never bother about viewers. They are so serious about their work that they are not ready for any compromise. Result? The creator is proud of his product while the viewer is bewildered.

One man who could produce films of aesthetic merit which also glued the average viewer to his seat was Ritwick Ghatak. No other Indian film director succeeded to such an extent in making films that satisfied both the critic and the ordinary viewer. Now, four decades later, the director of Komal Gandhar and Suvarna Rekha has a worthy successor.

For Malay Bhattacharya, 48, the film KAHINI, cost a lot of energy and five valuable years of his life. It passed censorship last year and was shown this February to a chosen few in Calcutta. (...)

As the film moves from scene to scene, sometimes incoherently, the viewer gets more and more engrossed in the film. The links between scenes are anything but clear though it is impossible for a viewer to look away from the screen even for a second. Therein lies the unique craft of Malay, the director; the viewer, for the first time, gets a chance to put together the puzzle, perhaps add what's missing and come up with a story.

The narration transcends the limits of time and space - events in the past, present and future are told simultaneously. If that sounds like a complicated task, he got able assistance from the award-winning cinematographer Sunny Joseph, 35, who had earlier wielded the camera for Malayalam parallel movies like Piravi and Vastuhara, and Arghya Kamal Mitra, the editor. The film is in colour but the director has opted for black and white while portraying the stark realities of urban life, shorn of its frills and fantasies.

For Malay, a graphic designer and an ad man, KAHINI is a dream come true. Even as a teenager, he hoped to make his own films one day, though it was a rather unrealistic goal for a boy who came from an average middle class family in Bengal. His father, a journalist, had left the family to fend for itself one fine morning when he yielded to his spiritual calling. Malay was just six at that time and his mother had to bring him up and her other two children all by herself.

His life took a critical turn after he went in for applied art at Government College of Arts, Calcutta, and specialised in graphic design. This gave him a skill and enabled him to go to West Germany where he not only earned money but also learned film making.

In 1977, he returned to Calcutta and spent all his savings (around Rs 7 lakh) on a graphic design unit, Message Creative Consultants, which he launched along with his wife Chandramala, who is also a graphic designer. He later added an ad agency division to his company.

After successfully making four documentaries, he launched a TV film making unit, Movie Mill: The much-acclaimed Galpa Salpa, a tele-serial featuring 13 short stories by eminent writers, was produced in this unit.

"Appreciation of Galpa Salpa convinced me that I can make a feature film," says Malay, down to

earth and soft spoken. That is the background of KAHINI, perhaps the most disturbing Indian film of the nineties. His film would leave any thinking viewer with a heavy heart and he insists that this is what he wants. "Otherwise what's the use of making films?" asks Malay.

Malay knows that no distributor would even touch his film, on which he has spent his life's savings. In fact, he was forced to sell all his wife's ornaments, who is a co-producer, and borrow from friends to complete his dream project. He is now literally a pauper, if you discount one asset: his film KAHINI. Tapash Ganguly, in: The Week, Calcutta, March 17th, 1996

Bhattacharya's story is refreshingly different

Calcutta: A series of connected cinematic frames have been put together to make KAHINI which means 'a story'. If there is incongruity, it is deliberate. The director, Malay Bhattacharya doesn't tell a story as in a narrative. Instead, he arranges his shots in a manner that has an order but not necessarily the only one. In fact, by consciously denying the predictable sequence, Bhattacharya leaves various options open.

The entire episode could be as much part of a story as a digression. There are several characters in the film. Rajat Chowdhury plays the central role among them. The centrality is not only in terms of the number of frames he dominates but also that his personal emotions are crucial for situating those of the others. Yet they are not connected in a sequence. This makes each shot complete. It also allows a degree of flexibility and the freedom to move in any direction and order. There does not have to be a beginning and an end. It could well be the end and a beginning all over again.

This breaking away from the conventional story telling genre is indeed a brave venture on the part of Malay Bhattacharya, ably supported by competent editing, crisp dialogue and commendable music. Rajat does not meet the two other men, the sign painter and the taxi driver, just as he does not meet any of the others in the film. Yet they are all brought together and while remaining individuals with separate identities, they are incorporated into the general structure of the film. This constant breaking down and rebuilding of parallel structures makes the film refreshingly different from the usual run of Bengali films. It is also a film which does not make easy viewing since the Indian spectators have long been lulled by story telling wherein the film gradually moves towards a resolution. KAHINI, on the other hand, does not resolve, neither Rajat's personal anguish, nor Gautam's dilemma or Parimal's frustrations. Yet, they share common grounds even if it is in their agony and remorse. This is reiterated by keeping two simultaneous features side by side - one, the racy movement and the other, hopeless impasse. (...) Aus: The Asian Age, Calcutta, February 17th, 1996

The viewer's participation is imperative

The question which naturally arises is "why such a subject for a film?" Is it to draw parallels between the period of turmoil in the Naxalite generation (the film refers to the movement in no uncertain terms) which, in some ways, is similar to the confusion of the present generation in the context of a market economy? "Well, not quite," Bhattacharya says. "You see, a market economy modifies your existence into a pattern which suits it. Previously, people had a lot more time at hand which meant also that they had a larger variety of interests. In the present state of affairs, you are judged by a set of figures, your bank balance, your credit card number, a 'different' sort of numerological existence which codifies and regiments human behavior in terms which are absolute, leaving no scope for any ambiguity whatsoever. Therefore, any individual who cannot adapt to this situation is likely to be in a state of frustration, a state that leads him to search for his

roots. So the film is an exercise in analysing the contemporary context, rather than drawing a conscious parallel between the two situations." However, Bhattacharya does not rule out the fact that in such an open ended film as his, parallels may be drawn even though not consciously intended by the director.

Bhattacharya concedes that understanding the film did pose a problem for several viewers. But then "Is it necessary that every sequence of the film be 'correctly' understood by the viewer?" he enquires. "There were a lot of people who felt after seeing the film that they had not quite understood portions of it, but had found viewing that film an enriching cinematic experience. This is exactly what we sought," Bhattacharya says. (...)

The director experiments with narrative technique in KAHINI. He has fractured the basic relationship between the film and its viewer, that of communication. The film, therefore, becomes an exercise in introspection.

Who then does he see as the potential viewer of KAHINI? "KAHINI was not made for popular entertainment, and we are quite aware that the box office is not likely to respond to the film. It is a film where the viewer must participate to make the cinematic experience a profitable one." Does he plan to attempt a commercial venture in the future? Bhattacharya is not very sure. "I doubt whether I will be able to do anything of the kind", he says, "it's not really my line."

Did choosing Dhritiman Chatterjee to play Rajat have anything to do with his past performances in off-beat films by Mrinal Sen and in Satyajit Ray's Pratidwandi? "Well, yes. He has this screen image that creates a kind of stock response and we have tried to utilise this throughout the film. Even apart from Dhritiman, stock responses form an integral part of KAHINI's structure. For example, after the kidnapping, there is this shot of a telephone ringing. The immediate connection that comes to mind is "ransom", even though we have stated nowhere that a ransom has been demanded."

While it is important that such ventures must continue, does Bhattacharya feel that the government should play a greater role to encourage them? "Certainly. If the recognition that has been given to KAHINI can encourage a few other directors, it will be for the ultimate good of the medium. Making the film has been an enriching experience for all those associated with it and as the film progressed, we all did some growing up. It has been one big team effort and people have contributed to it every step of the way. The film took years to make, but there is no point in highlighting the 'sacrifices' that one had to make, since that was something we took upon ourselves. Nobody imposed it on us. And who has ever produced a sincere work of art without sacrificing something or other?"

Future plans? "I'm thinking of doing a film on terrorism and the middle class. I also have a project in mind about a 'misfit' in society - the dialectic between his intellect and existence. We'll have to work out the details." (...) Suman Ghosh, in: The Asian Age, May 31, 1996

Biofilmography

Malay Bhattacharya was born in Calcutta. Following his graduation, at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Calcutta, he obtained a Diploma in Applied Art from Govt. College of Art & Craft, Calcutta, in 1970. He then moved to Germany and worked as a Graphic Designer from 1970 to 1977.

He returned to Calcutta in 1977. Since then he has been writing screenplays, producing and directing teleplays. KAHINI is his first feature film. It took him five years to complete.



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